

The Emotion of Pain for a Critical Theory of Society

di Erika Benini
erikabenini00@gmail.com

Pain, as a physical and emotional experience, is an involuntary and unpleasant response to a situation, namely an external manifestation of an unintentional aversion to reality. This paper discusses the social aspects of pain that are relevant to political philosophy, insofar as the concept of pain can be considered as an effective parameter to define a society. It will be argued that if pain in our society is experienced as private, the experience of solidarity can only be shared with people and situations with whom we can identify. In order to understand the emotional distance of many injustices in the world, the need for an awareness of human beings' involvement in other people's suffering is critical.

Introduction

According to the IASP (International Association for the Study of Pain), pain is «an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual and potential tissue damage, or described in terms of such damage»¹. However, to speak about pain does not only mean to speak about a disagreeable (physical and emotional) experience. To speak about pain mainly means speaking about a *great contradiction* that can be approached in different ways, starting from the different stances that philosophers have taken towards pain.

In the philosophical debate, pain is defined in a variety of ways and from opposing perspectives. In certain areas (such as philosophy of mind, and certain fields of phenomenology and psychology) only the universal structure of pain and/or its character of individuality are underlined; in other areas (such as biopolitics and political philosophy) the focus of the analysis is on the social character of pain.

¹ Definition of “pain” provided by the International Association for the Study of Pain, available at: <http://www.iasp-pain.org/Education/Content.aspx?ItemNumber=1698> [Last accessed on 2018 June 12].

On the one hand pain is indeed a personal experience, so that, as Ulrich Kohlmann has said, «every suffering suffers differently. And not everybody suffers»². When experienced, pain is immediately felt in its singularity, and it is impossible for the subject to completely communicate the singular character of their experience.

On the other hand, pain has a public-social dimension. This is not only because the majority of pain is caused by our society, but also because pain as such, as an emotional and physical experience, is always socially mediated, so that the conception of pain can be considered as a parameter that defines a society. The way in which people respond to what they consider as *painful* is not only different in each society, but has also changed in every society over time. In Johanna Bourke's words, people-in-pain's responses to afflictions are normative: «People-in pain seek to conform to these instructions for numerous reasons, including non-reflexive ones (this may be especially true of those figurative ways of speaking about pain that have been internalized from infancy or are deeply embedded in language)»³.

Theodor Adorno investigates pain in its twofold nature, through the dialectic between the private and social dimensions. These dimensions are both crucial to understanding pain: they are at the same time not completely separable and not completely solvable in one dimension. Pain has a private side that is often perceived as being isolated, but that should always be understood in a social context that mediates this feeling. The duty of a political philosophy is to reflect on the *senselessness* of pain in our society, to focus on the suffering, not only in order to describe it, but above all to find its truth. As Adorno puts it: «The need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth»⁴. This truth lies both in the presence of suffering, that is, in its public dimension, [as Benjamin says, because «as long as there is still one

² U. Kohlmann, *Dialektik der Moral. Untersuchungen zur Moralphilosophie Adornos*, zu Klampen, Lüneburg 1997, p. 143. My translation from German: «Jeder Leidende leidet anders. Und nicht alle leiden».

³ J. Bourke, *Story of pain. From prayer to painkillers*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014, p. 17.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

beggar around, there will still be myth»⁵], and also in the way that we feel suffering/pain, in its private dimension.

My article will analyse this duty by discussing, with and beyond Adorno, (1) what is the pain on which we must reflect, and (2) how could it be expressed, or in other words, in what way could we allow the pain to become eloquent. In part (2) I will focus my attention on the role of artistic images as expressions of pain and criticize an idea of empathic emotion as feeling for the pain of others.

1. What is pain: The contradictions of its senselessness

With Adorno we can speak of two major contradictions of pain, in its collective and private dimension. These contradictions are, according to Adorno, not only anthropological or natural, but also historical.

The first of these contradictions is the *existence* of senseless pain. Unnecessary pain *negates*, by its very existence, an idea of historical and rational progress: despite technological progress and social improvements, people continue to suffer. Thus Adorno writes: «The physical moment tells our knowledge that suffering ought not to be, that things should be different»⁶. Adorno interprets history as catastrophe and suffering, and inverts Hegel's view that history as second nature means progress and freedom: «His world spirit is the ideology of natural history»⁷. He takes as a model Walter Benjamin's idea of natural history, according to which nature is the forgotten of history that, in an allegorical view (contrary to a symbolic view), is the pain that is not transfigured: «Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed as a face – or rather in a death's head»⁸.

The second contradiction is in the *way* we feel pain. History produced suffering and at the same time let this suffering forget. Adorno wants to break

⁵ W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (1982), translated by H. Eiland, K. McLaughlin, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1999, K 6, 4, p. 400.

⁶ T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (1966), translated by E. B. Ashton, Routledge, London-New York 2004, p. 203.

⁷ Ivi, p. 356.

⁸ W. Benjamin, *The origin of German tragic drama* (1925), translated by J. Onsbome, Verso, London-New York 1998, p. 166.

with a view of history as the defense of development, and, like Walter Benjamin's Engel, «awake the dead, and make whole what has been smashed»⁹. In the *Dialectics of Enlightenment* Adorno and Horkheimer draw a parallel between the situation of patients under anesthetic as described in a nineteenth century letter, and our relationship with pain. They mention a letter of the French physiologist Flourens about the use of chloroform in surgery, in which it is claimed that «in conjunction with a general paralysis of innervation, pain is felt still more keenly than in the normal state» but «the deception of the public results [only] from the inability of the patient to remember the events once the operation is completed»¹⁰. In response to this, Adorno and Horkheimer write: «A suspicion would arise that our attitude toward human beings, and toward all creatures, is no different to that toward ourselves after a successful operation: blindness to torment»¹¹.

This *blindness* shows, on the one hand, the selective-cultural character of pain. In Judith Butler's words, in a text after September 11th, not all people are worthy of grief: «Some lives are grievable, and others are not; the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved, and which kind of subject must not, operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human: what counts as a livable life and a grievable death?»¹².

On the other hand, the blindness to pain shows the impossibility of reflecting on all unintentional bodily feelings of inadequacy, annoyance, helplessness, and aversion to situations or aspects of reality that we can have. This kind of suffering is, according to Adorno, who refers to psychoanalysis, the trace of the repression or transformation by the (socially conditioned)

⁹ W. Benjamin, *On the concept of History* (1940), in W. Benjamin, *Selected writings*, Volume 4 (1938-1940), translated by E. Jephcott and others, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 2006, p. 392: «There is a picture by Klee called Angelus Novus. [...] The angel would like to stay, awake the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is this storm».

¹⁰ T. W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical fragments* (1944), translated by E. Jephcott, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2002, pp. 190-191.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² J. Butler, *Precarious Life. The power of Mourning and Violence*, Verso, London-New York 2004, pp. XIV-XV.

consciousness, the trace of something that we are not able to really feel, namely to understand and to autonomously elaborate.

These moments are to be reflected upon and understood in terms of their potential for truth: «Instead of curing neurosis [like Freud], he [Kafka, but we can also say: the same Adorno] seeks in it itself the healing force, that of knowledge: the wounds with which society brands the individual are seen by the latter as ciphers of social untruth, as the negative of truth. His power is one of demolition»¹³.

That is, our society produces unnecessary pain: we are unable to accept all the pain that is produced within our *universal* idea of pain, and to understand the feelings that negate our harmony with reality. For these reasons the most important duty is to let pain become eloquent, *to lend a voice to suffering*.

2. How to lend a voice to suffering

Those who say that pain is not sufficiently considered in our society fail to offer a political analysis of society. Thanks in particular to the internet and social networks, we are continuously bombarded not only with news, but also with photos, videos, and movies about wars, natural disasters, poverty, death, rapes, executions. Suffering is the order of the day. Not only do we become used to living directly in a state of vulnerability, to accepting a dimension of potential danger and pain, but we also become accustomed to being close to suffering.

Currently the images transmitted via television, the internet or newsprint are the most common means to show pain. Images are more immediate than all other forms of representation, and they are directly accessible by everyone.

But images of pain as such do not let pain become eloquent. With her analysis of war photographs in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag focuses on the issues concerning images that aim to be mere copies of reality. Not only do such war photographs appear to depict reality objectively, but they always show a perspective that can manipulate reality more than a

¹³ T. W. Adorno, *Notes on Kafka* (1953), in T.W. Adorno, *Prisms*, translated by S. Weber, S. Weber, MIT Press, London 1997, p. 251.

report because of their illusion of immediacy. In general, such images make people feel closer to the pain of others, and arouse an emotional identification with painful situations: they give the emotional illusion of being close to suffering, but in fact they leave us distant from an understanding of pain and its context, and thus they allow us to accept suffering. In Sontag's words: «So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence. To that extent, it can be (for all our good intentions) an impertinent—if not an inappropriate—response»¹⁴. As Benjamin argues, that is a point of view that means an *empathy with the victors*¹⁵. To immediately identify oneself with suffering is always to identify oneself with determined, acknowledged suffering, and, indirectly, to accept its existence.

It could be interesting, without addressing the controversy between Adorno and Benjamin about pictures of cultural industry (and Adorno's scepticism about them), to briefly recall Adorno's definition of the artistic image in order to reflect on the duty of images in our society. In *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno defines the artistic image as apparition, and distinguishes it from a copy: «Artworks are images as apparition, as appearance, and not as a copy [...] If, as images, artworks are the persistence of the transient, they are concentrated in appearance as something momentary»¹⁶. The image as apparition shows a truth that is not an immediate imitation of reality as such. Instead, it recalls something that is particular and fleeting, and that is shown in its distance. It is momentary, because it does not allow itself to be grasped. Its distance is, according to Adorno, not another dimension to immanence, but an alterity within the immanence that is not immediately to be seen and that does not lend itself to be represented in an immediate way.

An image is artistic if it can combine the moment of mediation, the technique, with the mimetic moment, with the capacity of non-conceptual

¹⁴ S. Sontag, *Regarding the pain of others*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 2003, p. 102.

¹⁵ W. Benjamin, *On the concept of History*, cit., p. 391: «The nature of this sadness becomes clearer if we ask: With whom does historicism actually sympathize? The answer is inevitable: with the victor. And all rulers are the heirs of prior conquerors. Hence, empathizing with the victor invariably benefits the current rulers».

¹⁶ T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), translated by R. Hullot-Kentor, Regents of the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis 1997, pp. 83-84.

affinity with fragments of living reality that is that of pain: «Artistic expression comports itself mimetically, just as the expression of living creatures is that of pain»¹⁷. Dissonance becomes the material and the form of art: historical moments of tension and contradiction are combined in dissonant configurations that do not transfigure them, but try to express their unexpressed and unexperienced aspects: «Every dissonance is in a certain sense a part of the remembrance of the suffering that the domination of nature [Naturbeherrschung], and ultimately a dominating society, inflicts on nature»¹⁸.

An experience of dissonance is a shocking experience of affinity with what is negated by society, and implies an impulse to feel human and non-human suffering without involving an immediate empathic emotion as such. Through empathy, according to Aristotle's classical definition¹⁹, a person is able to feel the pain of a sufferer only if they are close to her, so that this emotion has a selective and self-referential character, in contrast to its supposed universal character. This moment of affinity with the sufferer goes beyond a mere identification with the pain of others: «Once man, the subject, knows the moment of his own equality with nature, he will desist from merely equalizing nature with himself»²⁰.

Such feeling attempts to gain direct access to forgotten (and painful) contradictions of reality, not in order to remain an immediate feeling, but to provide the possibility of reflecting on it. Thus, philosophy and its conceptual system are not redundant. It is only the encounter of images and thought that allows the critique of reality, namely the eloquence of pain.

¹⁷ Ivi, p. 110.

¹⁸ T. W. Adorno, *Ästhetik*, Wintersemester 1958-1959, ed. by O. Eberhard, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 2009, p. 66. My translation from German: «Jede Dissonanz ist gewissermaßen ein Stück Eingedanken des Leidens, dem die Naturbeherrschung, dem überhaupt schließlich eine herrschaftliche Gesellschaft die Natur aussetzt [...]».

¹⁹ Aristotle's well-known definition of pity says «Pity may be defined as a feeling of pain caused by the sight of some evil, destructive or painful, which befalls one who does not deserve it, and which we might expect to befall ourselves or some friend of ours, and moreover to befall us soon» [Aristotle, *Rhetoric* (II 1385b13ff), translated by W. R. Roberts, Modern Library, New York 1954, p. 113].

²⁰ T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, cit., p. 269.

Such images need to be mediated by thought because their truth needs to be fixed and articulated to become critical: «Each work, if it is to be experienced, requires thought, however rudimentary it may be, and because this thought does not permit itself to be checked, each work ultimately requires philosophy as the thinking comportment that does not stop short in obedience to the prescriptions stipulated by the division of labor»²¹ [that is, in obedience to the dominating society].

Philosophy, on the other hand, needs to mediate artistic images in order to try to go beyond its self-referential logic and to capture the mimetic moment, the impulse of feeling an affinity with reality: «Dialectics is a thought that does not satisfy itself with the conceptual order, but completes art by correcting the conceptual order through the being of objects»²².

If pain is not only the central aspect of society, but is also the aspect of society that allows us to criticize society, then images and thought must work together to achieve this outcome. As Susan Sontag suggests, albeit in the context of discussing images that are photographs, images owe the ethical duty not to give an emotional identification, but «an invitation to pay attention, to reflect, to learn, to examine the rationalizations for mass suffering offered by established powers»²³.

²¹ T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, cit., p. 462.

²² T. W. Adorno, *Einführung in die Dialektik* 1958, ed. by C. Ziermann, Suhrkamp, Berlin 2010, p. 10. My translation from German: «[...] Dialektik ist ein Denken, das sich nicht bei der begrifflichen Ordnung bescheidet, sondern die Kunst vollbringt, die begriffliche Ordnung durch das Sein der Gegenstände zu korrigieren».

²³ S. Sontag, *Regarding the pain of others*, cit., p. 117.